# **Vocation in the Scriptures**

John Goldingay

Professor of Old Testament

How do the Scriptures help us in our understanding and practice regarding vocation? This chapter considers

* how the Scriptures themselves speak about vocation or calling,
* how contemporary understanding compares with the thinking in the Scriptures – how it is both broader and narrower, and
* how the Scriptures might thus be a resources to us.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## **The Words**

Discovering what the Scriptures say about a topic such as vocation can involve at least three kinds of study. One involves looking at the way the Scriptures use the word in question, and the way they use related words. Another looks at the way we use those words and talk about the topic, and asks about the similarities and differences in relation to the way the Scriptures talk. A third looks at the topic as one that emerges from our context and concerns, and at the way the Scriptures may be talking about the topic in question even if they don’t use our word for it. We begin with the first of these three forms of study.

The word *vocation* doesn’t come in English translations of the Scriptures, but the word *calling* does come, and *calling* is simply an Anglo-Saxon based word that’s equivalent to the Latin-based word *vocation*. In the New Testament it represents the Greek word *klēsis*, from the verb *kaleō*, meaning “call.”

The starting point for understanding the idea of a calling or vocation is the fact that God has summoned the church to acknowledge Jesus as Lord. *Summons* and *invitation* along with *calling* and *vocation* are other English words that overlap with the New Testament word *klēsis* and help to represent it. God’s calling to us, our vocation, our summons, his invitation to us, gives us a confident expectation that he is going to fulfill his purpose for creation and for us (Eph 1:18; 4:4). Our vocation means that we press towards the goal associated with that upward summons (Phil 3:14). We share in a vocation that comes from the heavens (Heb 3:1).

God’s calling also means an obligation to live a life now that’s worthy of that vocation (Eph 4:1). It’s an obligation that God has to enable us to meet (2 Thess 1:11). It’s the way we firm up our vocation from God and our choice by God (2 Peter 1:10). That last observation is illuminating for the way it links God’s calling of us and God’s choice of us. God called or summoned or invited us (2 Peter 1:3); by living God’s way, we establish that vocation and thus we eventually get into God’s kingdom (2 Peter 1:11). The observation fits with the comment elsewhere that when God saved us and summoned us with a holy vocation, it was not in accordance with our deeds but in accordance with his purpose and grace (2 Tim 1:9). An aspect of the good news is then that “the expressions of grace [*charismata*]and the calling of God are not capable of being revoked” (Rom 11:28-29): God can’t change his mind about them. Paul makes this statement regarding the Jewish people, who are loved by God in connection with God’s choice of them. But it’s also indirectly good news for Gentiles who are grafted into the people that God chose, loved, graced, and called. God has summoned both Jews and Gentiles to make known the riches of his honor (Rom 9:24-25). It’s our vocation.

A vocation is thus an obligation, but also a blessing, as is implicit in the presence of the word *invitation* among the English equivalents to *klēsis* (compare Jesus’s comment in Matt 20:16; 22:14 that “many are called but few are chosen”). It’s because we are called/invited in one body that Christ’s peace can arbitrate in our hearts (Col 3:15). “Out of darkness God called/summoned/invited you into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). God’s people are “summoned Christ Jesus’s” (Rom 1:6), “called saints” (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2). It’s their vocation. And they are called to hope: the New Testament makes a significant link between vocation and hope. Paul talks about “the hope of God’s call” (Eph 1:18). We were called to eternal life (1 Tim 6:12). We were called in the one hope of our call (Eph 4:4). We are “participators in a heavenly call” (Heb 3:1). Jesus died “so that the people who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance” (Heb 9:15). “By trust, Abraham, being called, obeyed by going out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance” (Heb 11:8). “God called you to his eternal honor in Christ Jesus” (1 Peter 5:10).

The two aspects to the vocation of the people of God, as blessing and obligation, are neatly encapsulated in Isaiah 41 – 42. On one hand, God’s calling Israel to be his servant is good news for Israel, because it means God is committed to Israel in the way a master is committed to his servant; if you are called to be God’s servant, you don’t have to be afraid, you know God will stand by you (Isa 41:8-10). Behind the call of Israel was the call of Abraham, which meant God blessed him and made him many (Isa 51:2). Associated with it is the call of Jerusalem, the call of the community for whom Jerusalem is their city: God’s calling them means God will show them a commitment and compassion that will last to the end of the age (Isa 54:6-8). Vocation means blessing for Israel.

On the other hand, masters summon servants because they want something done – if you are called to be God’s servant, you have a vocation in terms of embodying what it means to be God’s people and thus drawing other people to recognize God (Isa 42:1-7).

Both Testaments make clear that the object of God’s call was thus the people of God as a body. They talk about Israel’s vocation and the church’s vocation. But the corporate entity is made up of people. They are people whom God determined on ahead of time, who are then called by God in accordance with a purpose, and they are made faithful and honored (Rom 8:28-30). They have a vocation to share in the vocation of the church. They had a vocation that drew them into the fellowship of the Son of God (1 Cor 1:9).

In that sense, we all have the same vocation, the same share in the church’s vocation. But this vocation is not only one that applies to everyone in an undifferentiated fashion. Admittedly, whereas 1 Corinthians and Ephesians make key statements about the vocation of the whole church, about the vocation of individual believers, and about the vocation of an apostle, and also make key statements about the graces or gifts of individuals (1 Cor 12; Eph 4), they do not associate any of the vocations with the gifts and graces. But Paul does imply that God called us in a way that relates to our individuality. “Look at your vocation/calling, brothers and sisters, that not many wise in their human nature, not many powerful, not many well-born” were called (1 Cor 1:26). “As the Lord assigned to each person, as God called each person, so they are to live…. As a circumcised person someone was called? They are not to become uncircumcised. In a state of uncircumcision someone was called? They are not to be circumcised…. Each person is to stay in the calling in which they were called. Were you called as a slave? It shouldn’t trouble you.” (1 Cor 7:17-21; translations of the rest of this sentence vary, but I take Paul to be encouraging slaves to claim their freedom if they get the chance). This passage naturally worries us in more than one way, so we should pay it special attention as having something to say that confronts our way of thinking. To judge from modern translations, one aspect of its worrying nature is the fact that it describes our situation as already a vocation before the Lord called us. So modern translations have “stay in the condition/situation in which they were called.” But Paul’s words suggest that one might expect our vocation as believers to relate closely to our “natural” vocation.

The character of our individual vocation is illumined by the use of the verb *call*. One aspect of the Gospels’ talk about vocation is their saying that Jesus didn’t come to call faithful people but sinners, but to call them to a change of attitude (Luke 5:32). “You were called/invited/summoned to freedom… only not freedom as an opportunity for the sinful nature, but through love be slaves to one another” (Gal 5:13). “God called us not to uncleanness but to sanctity” (1 Thess 4:7). “Walk about in a way worthy of the vocation with which you were called” (Eph 4:1). “I press to the goal of God’s upward vocation” (Phil 3:14). Paul prays “that our God may make you worthy of the vocation and may fulfill every good resolve and faithful deed” (2 Thess 1:11). “You were called” to endure, if you do good and then suffer for it (1 Peter 2:20-21). “You were called” to repay wrongdoing or abuse by blessing (1 Peter 3:9). Work is then not our vocation, but it is a context in which we fulfill our vocation.

In some contrast with that general talk of calling, the Gospels also describe Jesus calling James and John, which comes closer to the way we speak of vocation. To think of James and John as having fishing as their vocation would fit with 1 Corinthians 7, but the Gospels more likely assume that they didn’t have a vocation until Jesus called them out of their work into a vocation. To speak of his calling is another way of saying that he told them to follow him and that he would make them fish for people, as he had already told Simon and Andrew (Mark 1:16-20). Paul’s understanding of his own vocation then overlaps with the Gospels’ way of speaking. While he speaks of the members of the congregation as “called Christ Jesus’s” (Rom 1:6), “called saints” (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2), in the same context he also speaks of himself as “called an apostle” (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1). “God saw fit, having set me apart from my mother’s womb and summoned me through his grace, to reveal his Son in me so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles” (Gal 1:15-16). Paul reflects the way his Scriptures speak of God calling or summoning a prophet (Isa 49:1); as well as summoning this prophet from the womb, God called someone else from the east to be his agent (Isa 41:2; 46:11). In Isaiah and in Paul it’s typical that receiving a vocation issues in trouble, persecution, and other forms of suffering.

The way the Scriptures talk about vocation, then, suggests a series of insights.

* My vocation is a call, a summons, and an invitation
* It’s part of God’s summons to the church to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and to be his servant
* It’s part of God’s invitation to the church to live in hope on the basis of what God is going to do
* But my vocation is also mine individually: it is (e.g.) to be a slave to my brothers and sisters, to endure persecution, to bless my attackers rather than attack back
* My vocation may relate to who I was before I came to know Jesus
* It may not relate to my gifts or graces
* While everyone shares in the vocation of the people of God, some people (e.g., Jeremiah, Paul) had special vocations

## **Vocation as We Think of It**

In the United States, we have come to put a number of ideas about vocation together.

* Work is something God calls us to as part of being involved in his work in the world
* My work is my vocation
* My vocation will be related to my passions, gifts, and personality
* Recognizing and fulfilling my vocation helps me to recognize and value who I am
* God has in mind a specific vocation for me
* Fulfilling my vocation will be an aspect of my becoming the person I was created to be
* It will be a way I play a part in God’s redemptive purpose for the world
* It will be particular to me, so I need to find out what is my specific vocation
* The place God calls me to is where my deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet
* Vocation applies to being a project manager, realtor, cook, butcher, politician, farmer, homemaker, carpet fitter, novelist, mother, or police officer, not just to being a pastor, missionary, or therapist

While our study of “The Words” suggests that these ideas do not correspond to the way the Scriptures speak about vocation, in itself that lack of fit need not mean that the ideas are unscriptural in substance. There is nothing unusual about the fact that our talk about this particular subject has little point of connection with the scriptural talk about it (it is equally true of our talk of justice, covenant, mission, holiness, the image of God, the kingdom of God, the church, ministry, worship, prayer, or leadership). The question is, do the Scriptures talk about these ideas even though they don’t relate them to “vocation”? But the lack of correspondence does raise the question of how far our interest in these ideas issue from our cultural context. It’s inevitably the case that our thinking is substantially shaped by our culture. While in some ways our thinking may then fit in with the Scriptures in a broader sense, in some ways it may not. It’s important to analyze what aspects of our cultural context have made a particular question significant, then to work both with the need to speak to people in their cultural context but also to help them escape from its limitations.

One problematic area in our thinking in this connection is the way we think of work. The Scriptures have little by way of a theology of work, as they have little by way of a theology of food, housing, sleep, vacation, leisure, or poetry (they have more by way of a theology of time, land, and family). I suspect that this shortfall is because they didn’t need one. Everybody knows that you must work if you’re to eat. Thus the comments about work in Proverbs or 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12 are pragmatic ones. One reason why the Scriptures don’t think of work as a vocation is then that they don’t think of work as something separate from life. There is a link with the fact that in Israel, and perhaps in earlier centuries in the West, work and worship were interrelated. The festivals were key occasions in the work year when people took time off to thank God for his gifts in creation as well as his involvement in Israel’s life.

We conflate work, employment, pay, and our personal significance. In the First Testament there is little by way of employment, of selling one’s labor. Most people work on the family farm or in the family business, which has the aim of doing enough to meet the family’s needs and to have a little bit over for bartering and for helping other families in need. There is no difference in status or significance between the work that the men do out in the fields or in the metalwork shop, and the work the women do in the house. Indeed, the Scriptures’ most spectacular account of a worker comes in the A-Z of a woman’s working day in Proverbs 31:10-31. In more recent times in the United States, too, most people had to do what they had to do – they were farmers, servants, or homemakers because their circumstances required it (this consideration again fits 1 Cor 7). In the Gospels, the family business dynamic continues in the lives of the Galilee fishermen; while Jesus talks quite a bit about employees, it’s because it provides him with illustrations not because he is reflecting on its inherent significance.

Related to these realities is a second problematic area in our culture, people’s need to gain a sense of significance. In the Scriptures people do not choose a particular form of work or way of life that matches who they are. Nor is engaging in work or fulfilling their vocation their way of playing a part in God’s redemptive purpose. Paul does in effect speak of his work as being given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17) and as completing the shortfall in Christ’s suffering (Col 1:24), but that ministry and suffering is an aspect of his and his associates’ distinctive vocation. It’s been said that nowhere do the Scriptures suggest that we contribute anything to God’s redemptive purpose except our sins.

While the Scriptures emphasize people’s gifts and graces, they do not relate these gifts and grace to their work, vocation, or personal fulfillment. They relate them to service in the church. And the Scriptures do not suggest that God generally has a view on what work an individual should do, any more than on whom they should marry (the only people for whom God designates a spouse are Isaac and Hosea, and it relates to their vocation). God, being a loving father, doesn’t want to tell people what to do with their lives, any more than he wants to decide who they should marry. He wants them to decide. God says, do whatever job you like. I’m looking forward to seeing what you choose.

So some of the cultural background to our thinking about vocation raises issues that the Scriptures in their cultural contexts don’t consider. Yet even where people’s way of thinking doesn’t fit with the Scriptures, we have to start where people are, as the Scriptures themselves assume. Jesus talks about the Torah making allowance for our hardness of hearts as well as starting from God’s creation vision and intent. The same feature may appear in instruction of the kind that Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 7 when he tells slaves to stay as they are in their vocation. A related feature of the Scriptures is that they sometimes model a way of thinking that bases itself on commonsense, exercised within the context of knowing the fundamentals of God’s relationship with us. Proverbs works this way. This framework is significant for thinking about vocation and formation. One example that the Scriptures illustrate is the relationship between vocations that God devises and vocations we devise. God devised the vocation of prophet and apostle. The people of God devised the vocations of priest, king, bishop, deacon, theologian, monk, and senior pastor, and God then adapted to them.

We are inclined to focus on the question what gifts we have (in which the Scriptures show no interest outside the context of church life), and it’s a commonsense question in our individualistic cultural context. To pull the question into a more scriptural framework would mean asking how God has made me someone who could be a servant to him and to other people, whether or not the exercise of my gifts brings me fulfillment. It would have suited me personally to give up classroom teaching and church pastoring earlier than I did, but I continued because it was my vocation, and the same applies to my continuing online teaching. It meant I could do that work knowing that God would sustain me even though it had become a burden rather than the privilege it once felt.

Likewise we are inclined to ask what work we *should* do and to ask how we decide on the question. While there are no doubt jobs that involve activities that are inherently wrong and that could not be vocations, beyond that point there’s no talk in the Scriptures about vocational discernment. Their implication is that an inability to identify your vocation means either God hasn’t given you one or you’re resisting it. There is no distinctive Christian angle on the question of seeing what work we should do except the awareness that I may be being called something that goes against my preferences and sense of gifting (like Moses or Jeremiah). When I sensed God calling me to the ministry, a question the Church of England encouraged such a person to think about was whether one had a love for people. I didn’t, but somehow I proceeded anyway and have more love for people now.

One reason why it’s important to us to know what job we should do is that in our culture we feel the need to feel significant and special, and a sense of vocation helps us in this connection. It provides a sense that we are here for some reason. It’s essentially a self-centered concern, and in the end it is not one likely to reduce our hopelessness and stress. Counseling people in connection with vocation might mean helping them deal with that need, rather than avoiding facing it and masking it by making vocation fulfill it. It would mean helping them discover the way God relates to them. There is a link with the indications in the Scriptures that having a special vocation can lead people into sin, as happened with Saul, David, and Solomon, and maybe with Moses, Aaron, and Peter. Secular and Christian leaders fall into sin, and I know its dynamics in my own life, and that sense of being special or of needing to be special may relate to this dynamic. Once someone thinks they are special and/or once they are in a position of power, they can find rationales for not keeping the rules that apply to other people.

## **Vocation and Wisdom**

It’s been said that the language of vocation has disappeared from Christian thinking. If that’s so, it means we can fill the language with scriptural content. On the other hand, it’s also said that secular self-help thinking is full of the language of vocation, so that this metaphor has been taken over by the secular world in the same way as the word *mission*. Ordinary people want to know about the distinctive individual meaning or purpose of their lives, and vocation is a framework for asking the question. This suggests two insights. One is the need to keep the question about vocation as a question about a relationship with God. The other insight is that the question about vocation is a question about insight.

If we want to think about living our everyday life as individuals, then the Scriptures that speak most directly to its questions are the so-called Wisdom books, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, with which one can also associate the other Solomonic book, the Song of Songs. It might be better to call them the commonsense books or the insight books. These Scriptures could be a key resource in connection with what we call vocational formation, the shaping of people to be functioning members of the people of God as it fulfills its vocation. They handle key questions about work, expectations, suffering, and sex, and they offer to reshape our thinking about questions that do or need to surface in connection with vocational formation.

They do so against the background of knowing who God is. Although they do not refer to what God did to make Israel Israel, nor to what God is going to do to fulfill his purpose in the world and for Israel, they do not talk about a life from which God is absent. In the English Bible they suggestively appear between the books relating what God has done in the past and the books talking of what God is going to do in the future, with the possible implication that they speak especially about what God is doing now and how people relate to God now.

Proverbs begins (1:1-7) by interrelating

* insight or shrewdness or smartness
* ethics in the form of faithfulness or fairness or doing the right thing by other people
* awe towards God or submission to God (translations commonly have “the fear of God,” but that rendering gives the wrong impression).

Proverbs goes on to talk (among other things) about sexual faithfulness, trust in God, generosity, acceptance of discipline, confidence for the future, truthfulness, love of one’s neighbor, hard work, and self-controlled speech. Vocational formation, then, suggests learning to be in submission, to trust, to do the right thing, and to expect things to work out. And the key to such learning is knowing who God is and listening to wise teachers.

Pairing with that passage at the opening of Proverbs is the portrait of a powerful woman that closes Proverbs (31:10-31), which has overlapping implications. Work is central to this woman’s fulfilling her vocation, though her work is not employment and it is not work separated from life and home. Her range of activities and achievements is discouraging for any ordinary mortal. But integral to them is the same awe for God or submission to God that the opening of Proverbs commends. Also integral to the picture is that her fulfilling her vocation includes teaching people with the kind of insight that expresses commitment and that includes generosity to needy people in the community.

The Song of Songs focuses on learning to love. This loving belongs in the context of a sexual relationship that is all-consuming and exclusive and likely to be lifelong, but that doesn’t find things working out in a straightforward way. The relationship meets with opposition within the family and within the broader community. But it puts before the readers the ideal of not giving up.

Ecclesiastes invites people to recognize that the things people think will give their lives meaning cannot actually do so. Degrees, fun, culture, achievements, work, possessions, relationships: they are all finally hollow. You are not going to change the world, Ecclesiastes urges. And you are going to die, and you need to live in light of that fact. It is a particularly important set of insights for a young person or an old person.

Job offers multiplex resources for dealing with personal tragedy. An aspect of the book that I especially love is that Job never knows what lies behind his tragedy, which means he has to live with it the same way as we often have to. Like the rest of the Scriptures, it has no answer to the question about theodicy. Instead, it deals with the question what you do with tragedy, how you look at it. It is in this connection that it offers its multiplex resources. Tragedy does mean you have to ask questions about your own responsibility for what has happened – is it your fault? But for Job, at least, the answer does not lie here. What Job does not know is that tragedy may test you, help you and God see who you are. It drives you to protest to God about it. It forces you to recognize that in the end you simply have to submit to God and that there are reasons why you not only must but can do so. It invites you to wonder if there might be a new day to dawn.

Maybe nothing is more important in thinking about vocation than relating it to suffering. Don McCullin, a photojournalist who has especially photographed scenes of conflict and hardship, “readily admits that he has been scarred by his experiences and thinks of his indisposition as part of his vocation*:* ‘seeing, looking at what otherscannot bear to see is what my life is all about’” (Jeremy Harding, *London Review of Books* 18 April 2019, 20). After the shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019, Prince William, the Duke of Cambridge, visited the country, and in meeting people who had lost loved ones, spoke as someone who had had the experience of losing his mother in a horrific auto accident. He knew that he had been shaped by having to come to terms with that loss. Being heir to the throne is not a vocation in the sense of something he can accept or decline, but it is a vocation in the sense of a position that calls him to the kind of life of service that his grandmother has lived. The shaping effect of his loss will have a decisive role in determining the way he fulfills his vocation.

The three schools in Fuller stand symbolically for three roles in connection with vocation. The School of Psychology stands symbolically for people gaining some self-knowledge in connection with their concern about the meaning and purpose of their lives, so that they can look at the vocation question from a less therapeutic angle. The School of Theology stands symbolically for people gaining some knowledge of the truth about God in whose context questions about God’s calling of us need to be set. The School of Intercultural Studies stands for people gaining some knowledge of the cultures in which questions about vocation arise and of what the fulfillment of vocations then looks like.

## **My Vocation**

When I was about eight weeks

my parents had me baptized

and thus initiated me into the vocation of the church

When I was about eight

they sent me off to Sunday School

which led to my coming to realize that vocation

When I was about eighteen

God gave me a vocation

to church ministry

When I was about twenty-eight

I drifted into being an Old Testament professor

which you might say became my vocation

When I was about thirty-eight

I knew that my vocation was to look after my wife Ann

(she was becoming more and more disabled with multiple sclerosis)

When I was about forty-eight

I fell into becoming a theological college principal (seminary president, in U.S.-speak)

which I guess became my vocation

When I was about fifty-eight

I segued into becoming more of a theologian and writer

which perhaps became my vocation

When I was about sixty-eight

I accepted a vocation

to be volunteer priest-in-charge of a small church

When I am about seventy-eight

I may glide into full retirement and think about vocations I might have followed

such as rock journalist or therapist or drummer

When I am about eighty-eight

perhaps I will have a specific vocation

in the new Jerusalem

## **Formational Practices and Resources**

Read through the Scriptures, three chapters per day, starting at Genesis, Job, and Matthew. Ask of each chapter: what does it suggest about the church’s vocation and about my vocation? What difference might it make to my thinking and life? Don’t worry if only one of the chapters each day has something illuminating to say. One out of three ain’t bad, as Meat Loaf didn’t say.

Specific resources:

Exodus 3 – 4

1 Samuel 8 – 12

Proverbs 31:10-31

Mark 1

1 Corinthians 7

Ephesians 1

1. I am grateful to Kathleen Scott Goldingay for her comments on this paper. Translations from the Scriptures are my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)